

Basic Detail Report

"Is not this Great Babylon that I Have

Built"

Date

c. 1904

Primary Maker

George William Russell (Æ)

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

39.4 x 54.6 cm

Description

This atmospheric painting depicts a sleeping maiden who is being watched - or watched over - by a spiritual, fairy-like being suspended above her and who is perhaps connected to her body. The mood is that of dream and reverie. The title is derived from the Old Testament: 'The king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty? (Daniel 4:30)'. They are the words spoken by the Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, before God reduces him to the status of a beast, thereby fulfilling Daniel's interpretation of the great ruler's kingdom. Unlike William Blake's unnerving treatment of Nebuchadnezzar's transformation, Æ passes over such an opportunity, for a serene, seemingly unrelated image. His interest lies not in divine retribution, but in the nature of Babylon itself as a snare for the spirit. In 'Talk by the Euphrates' (1893), Æ alludes to how the Babylonian attractions of the material world draw one from arduous tasks, "leading upwards towards Gods", while in 'The Interpreter's' (1923), he equates the proud Nebuchadnezzar's building of Babylon with any vainglorious construction work of the human imagination. Certain references in the later story in particular, despite the difference in date, suggest a close relationship with this painting. However, no definitive reading of the image is probably possible. Indeed its catalyst may have been immediate, visionary and wordless. (Catalogue Entry [27]: A Century of Irish Painting - Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, 1997, p. 150)